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Broad Inquiry Is Ordered In Disclosures of Secrets

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WASHINGTON, May 23 — The White House has instructed the National Security Council to begin a systematic Government-wide investigation into disclosing of sensitive intelligence information to determine if additional preventive measures are needed, senior White House officials said today.

The officials said the review would focus on the "whole subject," which appeared to suggest that it would involve not only officials engaging in such disclosing, but also how to respond to news organizations that might publish such information.

The review is to involve the entire Administration, including the State Department, the Defense Department and the Central Intelligence Agency, the officials said.

'Growing Concern' Cited

A senior White House official explained the review in the context of what he said was the Administration's "growing concern" with disclosures that have occurred in recent months amid Administration efforts to link the Government of Libya to terrorism and with newspaper and broadcast reports about a top-secret intelligence-gathering operation involving American submarines.

The official said "pragmatic" steps under review included further disciplinary measures for officials making unauthorized disclosures of classified information and measures related to the classification of documents.

At the same time, he said that the examination, as part of a dual strategy, was focusing on how to prevent the news media from reporting information that would harm national security.

Uncertain Effect on Press

The Reagan aides who discussed the review said it was uncertain what recommendations would emerge in terms of the news media. They said recommendations could range from attempts at encouraging news organizations to display what one called "more responsibility" in reporting national security secrets to a strengthening of a 1950 espionage law that prohibits the publication of classified information relating to codes and to intelligence gathered through intercepted communications.

Officials have raised the possibility that some news organizations might be prosecuted under the statutes, although none have been to date.

"There has been serious concern within the Administration on leaks," the official said. "That has manifested itself in growing concern about how to tackle the problem of conducting the confidential work of the Government without it appearing in the media immediately."

He said the new investigation was initiated at the request of senior Administration officials concerned over disclosures in the news media of what they have called important secrets affecting national security.

Another senior White House official familiar with the investigation raised the possibility that it could lead to the strengthening of the 1950 Federal statute, which he said was one area under review.

National Security Only

The officials denied that the investigation was designed to inhibit the disclosure of information that might be unflattering to the Administration but that does not involve national security secrets.

They said it was being undertaken separately from such actions as the dismissal of two Administration officials accused of disclosing information to the news media, and the warnings by William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, that news organizations reporting secrets could be prosecuted.

Last week Mr. Casey said in a speech that the Administration was studying whether new procedures and possibly new laws were needed to deal with Federal employees who decide on their own to disclose classified information.

The White House officials said Mr. Reagan had not specifically authorized the investigation. They declined to identify the senior officials who initiated it.

Public and Private Comments

Several White House officials have defended in private conversations the Administration's efforts to block disclosures of secrets harming national security or to punish officials thought to have divulged the information.

But in public statements, while stressing Mr. Reagan's concern about the release of national security secrets, they have generally said that it was up to the Justice Department to determine if such breaches were violations of Federal espionage laws.

The Central Intelligence Agency has been analyzing an article about a classified intelligence-gathering operation involving American submarines that appeared Wednesday in The Washington Post. The article indicated that Ronald W. Pelton, a former National Security Agency employee on trial for spying, might have compromised an intelligence operation that used a "high-technology device" to monitor Soviet communications.

Although Mr. Reagan has avoided direct comment on the Pelton disclosures, on May 10 he telephoned Katherine Graham, chairman of The Washington Post Company, to urge her not to publish the article dealing with underwater intelligence gathering.